Maritime Malabar in the Third Millennium BCE: Need for a Reappraisal

***Abstract*—The popular view that the early maritime history of the subcontinent commenced with—and was largely confined to—trade links between the Indus Valley cultures and the Middle East, needs to be further nuanced by re-examining the role of Malabar in the light of recent interpretations. This paper raises the conjecture that Malabar had a prominent presence in the Indian ocean for other reasons than just the spices trade, and that it could have possibly exerted significant influence over the trade in the region. The possible consequences of such a prominent maritime role are also explored.**

Keywords—Malabar; maritime linkages of Malabar; Indian Ocean; Trade in the 3rd Millennium BCE;

I. Introduction

It is widely believed that the maritime history of the peoples of the Indian subcontinent commenced with extensive maritime linkages between the Indus valley cultures in the North West of the present India, with Mesopotamian and Sumerian civilizations, perhaps from the third millennium BCE onwards. The presence of Indus valley seals in Mesopotamia has served to prove this point of view.

It is also accepted that the Indus valley people were a cosmopolitan civilization with extensive contacts with different cultures in the region, and depending on trade and agriculture to sustain itself. The technical competencies of the Indus valley people in terms of sciences such as astronomy, architecture, navigation and civic management are perhaps unsurpassed for their times. In contrast with the Indo-Iranian people who, according to most scholars, seemed to have migrated into subcontinent from around 1500 BCE, and who were tribal societies of pastoralists, it is notable that the Indus valley people who predated the latter by over 1500 years, were city builders who were cosmopolitan and scientifically accomplished.

The most significant unresolved aspects of the Indus Valley civilization are the origins of these people, the reasons for the decline of the civilization, and what happened to the people of Indus valley after their civilization declined, especially in terms of their socio-cultural artifacts (such as language, religion, and science). It is, of course, likely that given the presence of several mature civilizations in the adjoining region documented from around 4000 BCE onwards—from Elamites of Western Iran[1], or the Mesopotamian-Sumerian civilizations in relatively close proximity, or even the Egyptian and Mediterranean civilizations—the Indus valley people were composed of out-migrants from one of these (of course, eventually perhaps an admixture with local populations).

II. Malabar and its historic context

The Malabar coast of India, defined as the lower South-West coast of the Indian peninsula, is a distinct geographical region, characterized by a tropical rainforest biome, torrential monsoons, and a humid climate. The term "Malabar coast" is sometimes applied to the entire western coast of India from Konkan to Kanyakumari.

The Malabar region is wedged between the Indian ocean and the hills of the southern Western Ghats. The geography of Malabar—as distinct from both the Deccan plateau as well as the more arid Tamil hinterland—has resulted in an unique ecosystem characterized by high ecological diversity, and is home to numerous flora and fauna that are distinct from the rest of the peninsula. Historically, Malabar has been known historically as the home of spices—much in demand by medieval Europe, and eventually leading to the colonial occupation of India.

III. Maritime Contributions of Malabar

It has been conjectured that Malabar has been a significant trading centre from 3000 BCE[2], and that it had maritime linkages with Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Jerusalem and Arabia. The links between Malabar and Arabs has been long-standing and unbroken for over two millennia. The fact that there were communities of pre-Christian era Jews, as well as early Christians in Kerala—perhaps even before Christianity reached Europe—stands testimony to Malabar's links beyond those with Arabia. There is also the discovery of Malabar

[1] It has been proposed that the Indus Valley people spoke a Proto-Dravidian language which was part of an Elamo-Dravidian language subfamily.

timber from the ruins of Ur, a city in Sumeria[1] that is dated to about 3000 BCE [2].

It has been assumed that the main driver of these ancient maritime linkages was the spice trade. However, there are indications that the role of Malabar in the maritime history of India was much more substantial than hitherto projected.

William Wesley, a naval architect well-versed in the shipbuilding techniques of the Western Indian Ocean, writing in the Journal of the Polynesian Society, points out two significant maritime contributions of Malabar, viz., timber and cordage[3]. He goes on to say that Malabar was the *only* source of timber for shipbuilding in the entire region including Africa, Middle East and the Indian Peninsula:

> In the Indian ocean, from Kathiawar in India in the east to the mouth of the Zambesi in Africa in the west, there is not a mile of coast that could provide any timber good enough for boat-building. The whole of the Persian gulf, the Arabian, Somali and African coasts were useless in this respect. When Alexander wished to build ships in Mesopotamia there was only a little inferior wood available from the Cossaei country—all his ships had to be constructed in the Mediterranean, carried overland in pieces, erected and launched at Thapsacus on the Euphrates.
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> The only place where the materials for ships could be obtained in the Indian ocean was the Malabar coast of India. This was the origin of the great importance of the trade with southern India. It is no exaggeration to say that practically every ship that was built in the Indian ocean (excluding catamarans and sampans) was built with Malabar timber. Africa in its primitive state produced no timber; there were plenty of forests inland, but there was very little near the seaboard; and the inhabitants were not sufficiently civilized to engage in trade of this description.
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> Not only did the forests on the western Ghauts produce an adequate quantity but the quality was of the finest in the world. It is today. For outside planking, keels, stem and stern posts, Malabar teak (*Tectona grandis*) cannot be beaten. Another wood, Velamadhu (*Terminalia tomentosum*), was preferred for keels in ancient days; "aine" (*Autocarupus hirsuta*) was also used. Frames (ribs) were usually constructed of "jack" (*Autocarpus intergrifolia*); "pun" (*Calophyllum tomentosum*) made the most perfect masts; and "pali" (*Palaquum ellipticum*) the long lateen gaffs—a very flexible and practically unbreakable wood[3].

While little is known about the social organization in Malabar around 3000 BCE, it is clear that significant effort would need to be expended in felling and processing of this timber. It is here that the numerous rivers of Malabar, and its elephants come into use[3],

> The resemblance between the Malabar coast and Phoenicia (also to a less extent Cicilia, Lycia) should be noticed. The forests in both cases were within a few miles (twenty to thirty) of the sea-coast. The timber was felled, dragged down hill by elephants in Malabar, and put into rivers, and on the next rains the logs were picked up at the river mouth. All the hard-wood timber was seasoned in water.

Until the arrival of iron nails several two millennia later, the binding of plans on the hull as well as for rigging sails, anchoring and securing objects, a very important need was that of cordage. It is here that another strength of Malabar came into widespread use, [4]

> The Malabar coast is a home of the coconut-palm[5], and the people are the most skilled workers in coconut-fibre or 'coir' as it is called, all types of cordage being manufactured for fitting out the ships. It should be remembered that in the earliest times the outside planking was largely sewn on to the frames with cord. 'Treenails' were used to some extent, but a supply of soft iron nails was not available 1000 B.C., so the importance of the cordage industry increased.
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> It is no exaggeration to say that all the Sabaean and Musa ships—those owned and built at Bahrein, Gerrha, Muscat, Koweit, Cane, Rapta, and Sofala, and probably the Red sea ships as well—were constructed from Malabar timber and fitted out with cables, sails, and cordage produced in that neighbourhood. It was this trade which opened up the country in early times and made it the most important trading centre, educating the inhabitants to business ideas; later on other products, such as spices, gems, and manufactured goods became even more important articles of commerce, and

[2] There have been suggestions connecting the old Malayalam word, *Uru*, meaning a seagoing vessel, with the city of Ur, as evidence for this ancient link

[3] To be more accurate, the jackfruit tree is *Artocarpus hetrophyllus* and ayani or 'jungle jack' is *A. hirsutus*

[4] Interestingly, the fishing canoes of Central and North Kerala still use coir to bind the planks of their *kettuvalloms* and the logs of their *kattumarams*. In both cases, the word 'kettu' or 'kattu' means lash/tie, and the cordage used until the recent arrival of synthetic rope was coir

[5] There has been some controversy over the original habitat of *Cocos nucifera*, the coconut palm. Even while this issue has not been resolved satisfactorily, there appears to be evidence that the coconut (in its primitive form) had already reached India during the Eocene period[4] although these have been discovered in the rainforests of the Deccan and what today is Rajasthan. It is likely that the coconut, in its present form, was widely dispersed in the Pacific and Indian oceans by the Oligocene.

> if Mr. Warmington and other writers are correct, goods, silks, etc., from China and the Far East were brought overland to be disposed of to merchants visiting India. The *fons et origo* of the trade was undoubtedly shipbuilding timber and necessities.

The argument proposed here is that the earliest maritime importance of Malabar stemmed not from spices, but from its unique ability to provide the vital material for the construction of sea-going vessels in the Indian ocean, and that spices, gems and manufactured goods emerged later. While the author does not specifically state that this was indeed the situation around 3000 BC, evidence cited earlier about Malabar teak being located in Sumeria, indicates that the trade links were active as early as the Sumerian civilization.

IV. Implications of Malabar's Role

This early role of Malabar as the region's sole supplier of some of the most vital infrastructure for the trade in the region has implications on the early history of the region.

A. Indus Valley Links with the West Coast

There is little direct evidence of the state of the Indus valley communities during its period of decline (2000-1000 BCE). It is believed that after this period, evidence points to a transition into a composite culture combining the incoming Indo-Aryan culture with the remnants of the late Indus Valley cultures. While there is general acceptance that the city builders of the Indus Valley moved overland Eastwards and South-Eastwards in small groups, merging into the local culture as well as later merging with the Indo-Aryan culture, there is little specific reference to maritime migrations.

It is, however, reasonably clear that the Indus Valley civilization had well-established export links with Mesopotamia as well as the Persian Gulf. This is brought up by David W. Anthony, in his book *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* [5]:

> The Harappan cities exported precious stones, tropical woods, and metals westward on ships that sailed up the Persian Gulf, through a chain of coastal kingdoms scattered from Oman to Kuwait. Harappa probably was the country referred to as "Melukkha" in the Mesopotamian cuneiform records.

Further, it is possible that the Indus valley communities exported another strategically important material to southern Mesopotamia, tin, that was a key ingredient for bronze, an alloy in high demand used for weapons, tools and jewellery:

> An inscription on a statue of Gudea of Lagash, ca. 2100 BCE, was thought to refer to the "tin of Melukkha," implying that tin came up the Arabian Gulf in ships sent by Harappan merchants; but the passage might have been mistranslated. Intentional tin-bronze alloys occurred in about 30% of the objects tested from the Indus-valley cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, although most had such a low tin content (70% of them had only 1% tin, 9% copper) that it seems the best recipe for tin bronze (812% tin, 9288% copper) was not yet known in Harappa. Still, "Melukkha" could have been one source of Mesopotamian tin.

It is interesting that the Harappans exported 'tropical woods' to Mesopotamia as the region of the Indus valley, did not seem to have export-quality timber. It is also notable that the Indus valley had an export-oriented economy wherein seagoing vessels formed an important resource.

Further, some historians propose that the Indus valley people were Proto-Dravidians (the relict population of the Brahui people in present-day Pakistan being one of the evidences of Dravidian presence in the core geography of Indus valley), and also that the trajectory of the overland migration could be traced all the way to the extreme south of the Indian peninsula including the present-day Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

However, given that (a) Malabar was already having maritime links with Mesopotamia with whom Indus valley also had extensive linkages, and (b) Malabar was perhaps already supplying the region with requirements of timber and cordage for the seagoing vessels for trade, it is very probable that there would be direct links between Malabar and Indus Valley cultures.

If so, there is no reason to insist on an overland migration for the Indus valley communities to reach the Malabar coast, as people-to-people contact would already exist at the time of the decline of the Indus valley civilization. Further, if an Indus Valley-Malabar trade/supply link did exist, it is also likely that most of the Western seaboard of the Indian peninsula was involved in this link as well, as the West coast provides numerous natural harbours where vessels could halt safely for reasons of extreme weather or for trade.

Even while there is little direct evidence of such a migration pattern, it is nevertheless well within the realm of possibility, given the discussion above. Interestingly, this would also imply that proto-Dravidian languages could have been first spoken in Malabar before the rest of South India. Further study, perhaps based on new tools such as mitochondrial DNA, may also reveal links of anthropological isolates such as Kodavas with the people of the Indus valley.

B. Other Maritime Links

The pre-eminence of ancient Malabar in the Indian Ocean also points to other links that would have existed prior to the first millennium BCE. In addition to the Middle East, it is expected that Malabar would have had maritime linkages with the Eastern African seaboard as well as islands such as Maldives & Lakshadweep islands, Seychelles and Madagascar. As a rule, the people of Malabar, while being excellent ship-builders, are not necessarily known as a maritime trading community. Therefore, it is likely that people from these distant shores visited Malabar rather than the other way around[6].

V. Conclusion

Most accounts of Malabar *vis- à-vis* maritime linkages give the impression of a passive participant, largely as a beneficiary of its spices and a few other items such as sandalwood. However, the dimension of Malabar as a hub of a bustling maritime enterprise consisting of construction of distant-water vessels, from around 3000 BCE, has not been prominently recognized hitherto. This aspect of Malabar may have great cultural, technological, anthropological and linguistic significance, and therefore needs further study.

References

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[5] David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*, (ISBN 0-691-05887-3), Princeton University Press, 2007

[6] It is known that several traders from Arabia have transported boatbuilders as well as timber from Malabar to Arabia in order to manufacture the hull there. It appears that the dry climate of Arabia provides good seasoning for the timber